

The painful last gasp of Islamic hate

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, The Australian, September 22, 2012

It is a strange and bitter coincidence that the latest eruption of violent Islamic indignation takes place just as Salman Rushdie publishes his new book, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, about his life under the fatwa.

In 23 years not much has changed.

Islam's rage reared its ugly head again last week. The American ambassador to Libya and three of his staff were murdered by a raging mob in Benghazi, Libya, possibly under the cover of protests against a film mocking the Muslim prophet Muhammad.

They were killed on the watch of the democratic government they helped to install. This government was either negligent or complicit in their murders. And that forces the US to confront a stark, unwelcome reality.

Until recently, it was completely justifiable to feel sorry for the masses in Libya because they suffered under the thumb of a cruel dictator. But now they are no longer subjects; they are citizens. They have the opportunity to elect a government and build a society of their choice. Will they follow the lead of the Egyptian people and elect a government that stands for ideals diametrically opposed to those upheld by the US? They might. But if they do, we should not consider them stupid or infantile. We should recognise that they have made a free choice - a choice to reject freedom as the West understands it.

How should American leaders respond? What should they say and do, for example, when a spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's newly elected ruling party, demands a formal apology from the US government and urges that the "madmen" behind the Muhammad video be prosecuted, in violation of the First Amendment?

If the US follows the example of Europe over the past two decades, it will bend over backward to avoid further offence. And that would be a grave mistake - for the West no less than for those Muslims struggling to build a brighter future.

For a homicidal few in the Muslim world, life itself has less value than religious icons such as the prophet or the Koran. These few are indifferent to the particular motives or arguments behind any perceived insult to their faith. They do not care about an individual's political alignment, gender, religion, or occupation. They do not care whether the provocation comes from serious literature or a stupid movie. All that matters to them is the intolerable nature of the insult.

The riots in Muslim countries - and the so-called demonstrations by some Muslims in Western countries - that invariably accompany such provocations have the appearance of spontaneity. But they are often carefully planned in advance. In the aftermath of last week's conflagration, the US State Department and Pentagon were investigating if it was just such a coordinated, planned assault.

The Muslim men and women (and yes, there are plenty of women) who support - whether actively or passively - the idea that blasphemers deserve to suffer punishment are not a fringe group. On the contrary, they represent the mainstream of contemporary Islam. Of course, there are many Muslims and ex-Muslims, in Libya, Egypt and elsewhere, who unambiguously condemn not only the murders and riots but also the idea that dissenters from this mainstream should be punished. But they are marginalised and often indirectly held responsible for the very provocation. In the age of globalisation

and mass immigration, such intolerance has crossed borders and become the defining characteristic of Islam.

And the defining characteristic of the Western response? As Rushdie's memoir makes clear, it is the utterly incoherent tendency to simultaneously defend free speech and condemn its results.

I know something about the subject. In 1989, when I was 19, I piously, even gleefully, participated in a rally in Kenya to burn Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*. I had never read it.

Later, having fled an arranged marriage to the Netherlands, I broke from fundamentalism. By the time of September 11, 2001, I still considered myself a Muslim, though a passive one; I believed the principles but not the practice. After learning that it was Muslims who had hijacked airplanes and flown them into buildings in New York and Washington, I called for fellow believers to reflect on how our religion could have inspired these atrocious acts. A few months later, I confessed in an interview that I had been secularised.

The change had consequences. Asked about the poor integration of Muslim immigrants into Holland's civic culture, I recommended the emancipation of girls and women from a religious practice that motivates parents to remove them from school as teenagers and marry them off. Through emancipation, Muslim integration into Dutch society would come faster and endure. But I soon learned that by making such statements, I had unwittingly blasphemed three times: by associating terrorist attacks with a theology that inspired it; by drawing critical attention to the treatment of women in Islam; and - the worst blasphemy of all - by leaving the Muslim faith.

That was just the beginning of the adventure. When I eventually entered politics and campaigned for a seat in Dutch parliament, the atheist-liberal elite was thrown into confusion: I was either praised as a Voltaire or condemned as a diva desperate for attention.

The week before I was sworn into parliament, I gave an interview to an obscure paper in the Netherlands that caused an uproar. Dutch Muslim organisations had been demanding that the age of marriage be lowered from 18 to 15, touting the Prophet Muhammad as their moral guide. In response, I suggested that some of the actions of the prophet might be considered criminal under Dutch law. This prompted a delegation of ambassadors from Turkey, Malaysia, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia to knock on the door of my party leader shortly after I took my seat in the legislature, demanding my eviction from parliament for hurting the feelings of Muslims - those not only in Holland, but everywhere in the world, all 1.5 billion of them.

But that was nothing compared with what happened when I made a short film with Theo van Gogh (titled *Submission*) that drew attention to the direct link between the Koran and the plight of Muslim women. In revenge for this act of free thinking, Mohammed Bouyeri, a 26-year-old Dutch-Moroccan man, murdered van Gogh - shooting him eight times and stabbing him with two knives, one of which pinned a note to his body threatening the West, Jews, and me. As he was dying, my friend Theo reportedly asked his assailant, "Can't we talk about this?" It's a question that has haunted me ever since, often in bed at night. One side proposing a conversation; the other side thrusting a blade. Now I knew what it was like to be a combatant in the clash of civilisations. Having renounced Islam and openly criticised its political manifestations, I was condemned to a life cordoned off from the rest of society.

I quickly learned the drill leading up to any public meeting or event. "Follow me," the agent on duty would bark out, opening the doors to the armoured car. Then a fast-paced walk, more like a march: a dash into basements and cellars; down corridors and elevators; through greasy kitchens and laundry rooms full of startled workers. Agents whispering into wrists, elevators opening at the perfect moment, and I would be ushered into the occasion I was attending: a meeting of politicians; a town hall gathering; a reading; an intimate birthday party.

IT IS a dreary, enervating routine, one with which Rushdie is oppressively familiar. In *Joseph Anton*, he movingly relates the story of his ordinary life before the fatwa, how he lost that life, and then how he learned to adjust to it without losing his sanity. He keeps himself going by focusing on the funny side of things. He grows accustomed to waking up in unfamiliar houses and discussing his every move with strangers appointed by the government for his protection.

Before the fatwa, Rushdie had been a proud and stubbornly free man. But under threat of murder, he suddenly found himself forced to take orders from strangers for the sake of keeping himself - and his family - alive.

This risk was not abstract. Senior government officials told Rushdie about plots involving hit squads. The Japanese translator of *Verses* was stabbed to death, and the Italian translator seriously injured in an attack. Despite all this, Rushdie has remained a stalwart, fearless defender of free speech.

His critics in Britain were less reliable. Intellectuals who harboured personal dislike of Rushdie or contempt for his work suggested that he only had himself to blame for the fatwa and that he could have perhaps done something to avoid it. (When the critics exhausted this argument, they complained that taxpayers had to foot the bill for Rushdie's protection.) It came as an especially hard blow when those he had considered ideological compatriots took the side of the fanatics by default (usually by refusing to defend an inalienable right to write what he wished about them).

Rushdie felt particularly aggrieved that many of the attacks came from people whose world view he shared. His leftist credentials were undisputed, given his positions on apartheid, the Palestinian question, racism in Britain, and Thatcher's government.

What's more, Rushdie considered himself a friend, not an enemy, of Islam. He believed that his roots in Islam - though his family was not particularly religious - gave him credibility. His previous book, *Midnight's Children*, had been a hit in India, Pakistan, and even Iran. He had no clue that *Verses* would trigger a hostile reaction among Muslims.

How wrong it was to accuse him of provoking those who sought to silence him - and for the British government to urge him to apologise as a way of accommodating Muslim leaders. In the past 23 years, we have learned a lot about the danger of giving in to the demands of extremists. We now know all too well how it incites them to demand more and to refuse reason and a peaceful settlement.

Or at least some of us know it. How often have I endured bizarre conversations with government officials who cling to the illusion that the threat is temporary or that it can be negotiated. And then there are the even more delusional positions staked out by some prominent intellectuals who blame the writer, the politician, the filmmaker or the cartoonist for provoking the threat. In the days after van Gogh was murdered, too many prominent Dutch individuals expressed precisely this position, declaring smugly, "Yes, of course killing is wrong, but Theo was a provocateur." Will they never cease looking for ever more ingenious ways of apologising for free speech?

As the latest wave of indignation sweeps across the Muslim world, we should not be despondent. Yes, this is a setback for the Arab Spring. Yes, it is bloody, dangerous, and chaotic on the streets. Yes, innocent people are dying and their governments are powerless. But this too shall pass.

Utopian ideologies have a short lifespan. Some are bloodier than others. As long as Islamists were able to market their philosophy as the only alternative to dictatorship and foreign meddling, they were attractive to an oppressed polity. But with their election to office they will be subjected to the test of government. It is clear, as we saw in Iran in 2009 and elsewhere, that if the philosophy of the Islamists is fully and forcefully implemented, those who elected them will end up disillusioned.

The governments will begin to fail as soon as they set about implementing their philosophy: strip women of their rights; murder homosexuals; constrain the freedoms of conscience and religion of non-Muslims; hunt down dissidents; persecute religious minorities; pick fights with foreign powers - even powers, such as the US, that offered friendship. The Islamists will curtail the freedoms of those who elected them and fail to improve economic conditions.

After the disillusion and bitterness will come a painful lesson: that it is foolish to derive laws for human affairs from gods and prophets. Just like the Iranian people have begun to, the Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans and perhaps Syrians and others will come to this realisation. In one or two or three decades we will see the masses in these countries take to the streets - and perhaps call for American help - to liberate them from the governments they elected. This process will be faster in some places than others, but in all it will be bloody and painful. If we take the long view, America and other Western countries can help make this happen in the same way we helped bring about the demise of the former Soviet Union.

We must be patient. America needs to empower those individuals and groups who are already disenchanted with political Islam by helping find and develop an alternative. At the heart of that alternative are the ideals of the rule of law and freedom of thought, worship, and expression. For these values there can and should be no apologies, no groveling, no hesitation. It was Voltaire who said: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." As Salman Rushdie discovered, as we are reminded again as the Arab street burns, that sentiment is seldom heard in our time. Once I was ready to burn The Satanic Verses. Now I know that his right to publish it was a more sacred thing than any religion.

Islam faces its demons

DAVID PRYCE-JONES, The Australian, September 22, 2012

THE battle is on for the Islamic soul, and it is a crucial battle of our age. Primarily it involves Arabs, who must decide what kind of people they wish to be and what sort of contribution they will make to the rest of humankind.

They cannot answer such questions without also deciding the part played by Islam, their historic faith, in affirming their identity and its role in modern civil society.

A billion other Muslims, from the US to Europe, Asia to Australia, are watching and waiting. Depending which way the battle goes, the West will have a willing partner or an implacable enemy. The stakes could hardly be higher.

One of the most confusing factors at work is that many Muslims don't really know what to think of the West. They often imitate what they say they hate.

Not so very long ago, the Muslim world, with the exception of some deserts and mountains, had fallen into the hands of Europeans. Those Europeans set up a number of nations as they saw fit and off-handedly put an end to the caliphate that was supposed to be ruling the entire Muslim community.

The introduction of new-fangled ideas such as democracy, with political parties and elections and the rule of law, were so many invitations to Arabs and Muslims to come to terms with the present time. But the invitation was spurned.

The sight of British, French or Soviet troops on Arab streets led to the perception that Muslims could have allowed such a scandal to happen only because they were inferior, victims through no fault of their own.

In a culture that mandates shame for coming off second best in any encounter, it's pointless telling people that there's no shame attached to the course of history, and that the world is as it is. Shame is put to rest, and honour recovered, only when some action levels the score.

This was a tall order but in one Muslim country after another, army officers set about winning the independence that would certify honour. They succeeded. The societies they then built were centralised and militarised, in fact imitations of the totalitarianism that had done such damage to Europe. The intention to modernise and reform ended in brutality and vandalism.

Arab philosophical and political equivalents of a Locke, a Montesquieu, a Jefferson, might have helped launch an experiment in democracy, but they did not emerge. There are writers and academics today, such as Fouad Ajami and Kanan Makiya, who are brilliant expositors of what's wrong, but to my knowledge there are no thinkers analysing what a modern Arab society would be like and how to achieve it.

The Muslim Brotherhood wanted to achieve the same ends of independence and dignity but by different means.

For them, a rightfully ordered Islamic world satisfies the laws God decreed for the faithful in the Koran, and these are closed to the slightest modification, his words unalterable forever.

Obedience is the demand placed on the faithful, with the death penalty obligatory in cases of disobedience. Scholarship long ago took the mystique of divine revelation out of the Christian Bible,

but nothing like that has been done with the Koran. Like communism, Islam is an ideology with no conceivable half-measures.

Originally just a handful of friends in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has grown into an international body, representing the Sunni branch of Islam in at least 60 countries. One of the Brothers, Sayyid Qutb, was the author of many books arguing that only a return to the Islam of the early caliphate would restore Muslim power and dignity.

Promulgated everywhere, the Brotherhood program is regressive and totalitarian: "Allah is our objective, the prophet Mohammed is our leader, the Koran is our law, jihad is our way. Death for the sake of Allah is our most exalted aspiration."

For several decades Islamist extremists such as the Muslim Brothers have fought it out with the army, the former assassinating secular military figureheads, the latter imprisoning and executing Islamists, including Sayyid Qutb.

This power struggle expanded into a global issue once Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had seized power in Iran in the coup of 1979. Tall and gaunt, he was forbidding in his black robes and turban, devising a constitution that made him Supreme Leader, a clerical dictator.

Iran is the leading Shia country, but Khomeini appealed to the Sunni majority to unite into a single Muslim identity. The proposed Islamic Awakening Front would drive the US and Israel out of the Middle East and spread the word of Allah until the whole world was united under Islam. Khomeini openly rejoiced in the use of violence: "Islam says kill all the unbelievers, just as they would kill you all."

Quite probably Khomeini was acting in bad faith over his Islamic Awakening Front. His revolution, he said, was not about lowering the price of watermelons but subjecting the world to Allah. This was quickly perceived as promotion of the Shia cause exclusively.

In Lebanon, Iran has been arming and financing Hezbollah, a Shia militia of 10,000 volunteers with an arsenal estimated at 60,000 missiles capable of striking anywhere in Israel. Spokesmen for the regime up to and including Khomeini's successor as Supreme Leader and his President keep promising in Hitlerite language to wipe out Israel. The development of the Iranian nuclear program is a threat to Sunnis as well.

Nouri al-Maliki, leader of one of the main Shia parties in Iraq, and Prime Minister there, has sentenced, so far in absentia, his Sunni counterpart to death.

Syria has a Sunni majority but two dictators, Hafez al-Assad and his son Bashar, belonging to the Alawite minority, between them have ruled for 40 years. Alawites are affiliated to Shi'ites, and the Assads voluntarily turned Syria into an Iranian protectorate.

When the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood rebelled in 1982, Hafez al-Assad killed no fewer than 25,000, probably many more. In a dreadful symmetry, about the same number have been killed under Bashar al-Assad.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt line up for the Sunnis against Syria, Iran and Hezbollah for the Shi'ites, in a reprise of the sectarian confrontation that goes back to the earliest years of Islam. Combatants who once hacked off their enemies' heads in the field are replaced by a pilot flying a Russian jet over one of his own cities and dropping bombs on houses without knowing who is inside. Violence in these circumstances is the natural functioning of a political process that invariably comes down to a test of strength.

Pretexts for provoking Western democracies are easy to manipulate, and they have to be seen as the equivalent of gathering intelligence about the enemy's intentions and willpower, the difference being that innocent people lose their lives.

The crowd wanted to kill Salman Rushdie, for instance, but his novel had been published in English, a language they couldn't read to discover for themselves if he really was blaspheming. A single imam in Denmark reporting on cartoons in a provincial paper showing the prophet Mohammed set off a chain reaction of riots.

None of the crowd that attacked the US consulate in Benghazi had actually seen the mysterious video supposedly libelling the prophet Mohammed, but hearsay was enough for them.

Young women in burkas are seen at demonstrations brandishing placards with wobbly lettering in English, "Behead whoever insults Islam", obviously directed at non-believers.

A French satirical magazine pokes fun at the prophet and France closes 20 embassies for fear of reprisals. The rage behind slogans such as "Death to America!" or "Death to Israel!" is sincere, which makes this political theatre and the culture driving it all the more tragic.

Daily life on the Arab and Muslim street confronts individuals with hard choices and tests. The cruelty and criminality of the ayatollahs and the military dictators has been on a par. To whom should the individual turn for rectifying grievances and injustices? Are army officers or Muslim Brothers the better bet as job providers? Half the population of many Arab countries live on \$2 a day, while the ruling families of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates own their national economies.

And in the rightly ordered Islamic world there is an unequal relationship between Muslims and non-believers, and between men and women. A Christian caught practising the faith in Saudi Arabia is likely to be beheaded in public; a half-million Christians have fled Iraq; Islamists regularly attack and kill Christian Copts in Egypt and burn down their churches.

About half of Arab women are illiterate and in Arab Africa many undergo genital mutilation. No Arab university features on the list of the best 500 universities in the world. The number of books published in Arabic in the past thousand years is the equivalent of a year's publication in Spain. The total gross national product of the Arab world is the same as Finland's. Many of the young face chronic unemployment or the hardships of emigration. Boatpeople, and sometimes empty boats, wash up all along the coasts of Spain and Italy, and Australia.

The Arab Spring at first appeared to be about freedom. Dictators who had been in power for two or three decades, four in the case of Muammar Gaddafi, were forced into exile or lynched. It was unprecedented that former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was not lynched or forced into exile but given a reasonably fair trial and sentenced to prison.

The Muslim Brotherhood promised it would share power. But the leader of the movement has confirmed its ideological aim is "reforming the individual, followed by building the society, the government and then a rightly guided caliphate and finally mastership of the whole world".

A million people assembled in Cairo to listen to Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, now in his 80s and a Muslim Brotherhood spokesman as influential as Sayyid Qutb had been. He preaches that one day soon Islam will command the obedience of the US, and he has a good word for Hitler's handling of Jews.

In recent elections, the Brotherhood won enough votes to appoint a senior member, Mohammed Morsi, as first civilian President. Installed, he purged the army, the media and the judiciary, while proposing to have a constitution drafted that would leave Egypt in the permanent possession of the Brotherhood.

"Arab Spring? What Spring?" asks one of the many Egyptians disillusioned by the Brotherhood takeover. "I see only an utter and complete rape of the nation that was the cradle of civilisation by an ideology that is the most detrimental factor at the base of misery, repression and loss that humanity has ever seen in all its history." For him and those like him, the Muslim Brotherhood has hijacked a religion to achieve "ruinous and obnoxious goals".

Democracy is the sole credible way of escaping from the totalitarian dead-end in which the Arabs have landed themselves.

President George W. Bush made a brave but dangerous attempt at bringing in key changes via Iraq. President Barack Obama takes the opposite view: that Arabs have to find their own way out of the confusion. His idea of a helping hand is to assent to a conference, also dangerous in its own way, to see whether criticism of Islam might be banned outright.

Statistics are uncertain, but tens of millions of Muslims have settled in Australia, Europe and the US. No doubt the scrapping of all restrictions on entry and work would lead to an emptying of Muslim lands.

The future is with those who are here. Someone among them will have to work out how Islam can become a force for integration rather than separation. In the absence of such a person, the culture clash will turn nasty.

Soft power reaps only a hard fall

GREG SHERIDAN, FOREIGN EDITOR, The Australian, September 22, 2012

WHEN Australian government and intelligence agencies were considering the US presidential race four years ago between Barack Obama and John McCain, they asked themselves which man would be better for Australia.

On McCain's side was the traditional Republican focus on Asia and the Pacific, especially in security. McCain was a Vietnam veteran. He loved Australians. He stressed US alliances. In national security terms he looked like solid gold for Australia.

But there was a very strong argument for Obama as well. George W. Bush was an intensely unpopular American president internationally. There would surely still be anti-Americanism in the world under an Obama presidency, but it would operate off a much lower base. The US, so often personified in the incumbent of the White House, would generate much greater soft power under Obama and this would complement its hard power. The US would again enjoy the good opinion of mankind, as the US founding fathers put it.

The savage anti-US demonstrations across the Middle East this past week, and among Muslim communities in Europe and Sydney, and especially the death of Christopher Stevens, the US ambassador to Libya, show what a hollow hope that was.

The US's standing in the Middle East, and the Muslim world more widely, is just as bad as it ever was under Bush.

Here is a hard truth. Islamist extremists didn't hate America because of Bush. They hated Bush because of America. And now they hate Obama, because of America.

On the upside, Obama has given us almost everything we might have hoped for in a McCain presidency in terms of the Asia Pacific and a renewed emphasis on alliances. Indeed, although Asian political elites tend to be more comfortable with Republicans, most of them broadly, if relatively lukewarmly, want Obama to win re-election.

Asians are worried about the departure of Hillary Clinton and the Assistant Secretary of State, Kurt Campbell, who have been extremely good for Asia.

Obama's successes in national security have come almost entirely from the use of hard power, drone strikes on specific terrorists in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the Navy Seal mission that killed Osama bin Laden.

The failure, however, of his soft power in the Middle East is extraordinary. It is not necessarily a fatal setback, but it holds some important lessons.

If ever a US president was going to garner goodwill in the Muslim world it was surely going to be Barack Hussein Obama, with his Kenyan father, his post-colonial consciousness, his years of childhood in Muslim Indonesia, his eloquence on racial issues, the global pop star vibe he generated.

It wasn't only his identity and global media adulation that Obama had going for him. He made every conceivable effort in making overtures to the Muslim world. He tiptoed around Iranian sensibilities, extended an open hand to the ayatollahs, refrained even from voicing any early criticism when they stole an election. In Cairo Obama made an eloquent plea for reconciliation between the Muslim world and America. He beat up on Israel, even at one point refusing to be seen in public with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and he made an elaborate bow to a Saudi royal.

But none of it has won anything from the Middle East. It may be that Bush overestimated what hard power could achieve. But in his first year in office, Obama certainly overestimated what soft power, and his own personality and eloquence, could achieve.

After a pretty dismal first year, Obama got much tougher and much more effective. On the Middle East, his policy has been pretty ineffective but I am at a loss to imagine what a more effective policy might have looked like.

In the Middle East we are simply living through a period where no outside power, including America, can decisively direct the course of events. This is only partly because of a decline in US power. And remember, too, that the Middle East has always been recalcitrant, and US successes of any kind there have been few and far between. It is said that many years ago Paul Wolfowitz remarked that he was delighted to move from working on the Middle East to Asia, because in Asia problems got solved eventually, whereas in the Middle East they just went on forever.

It may be Mitt Romney was expressing no more than the plain truth when he told a fund-raiser that the best a president could do on the Israel-Palestine front at the moment is kick the can down the road a bit. Indeed, this remark to a private function, caught on a secret video and later made public against Romney's will, is in many ways pretty reassuring. This is no time for millennial visions. Sober leadership is at a premium.

Much of the dispute today rests in how we should interpret the Arab spring. It is still far too early to know how it will ultimately unfold. A more democratic Middle East was bound to be more Islamic and more anti-Israel in the short term. The hope is that the chaos and nationalism of the short term will not destroy the consolidation of a less extreme and more representative political culture in the Middle East, which is the only long-term guarantee of stability and moderation.

The big anti-American demonstrations, in response to a tacky, offensive, amateur anti-Muslim film which the Obama administration condemned, are very disturbing. But to some extent we need to keep our heads. Demonstrations are not everything. The murder of the American ambassador in Libya is truly shocking and an indictment of the Libyan security forces for not keeping him safe. Yet the political trend in Libya is still pretty good. Moderates won a sound electoral victory in Libya. The Libyan government utterly condemned the anti-American violence. Libya is a case where the West's friends, broadly defined, are in government and under violent attack from al-Qa'ida like extremists. So it is not in our interests for the US to scale down its efforts in Libya, or in the Middle East. Rather, we need to continue to support the Libyan government.

But the manner of Western support for moderates within the Muslim world is extremely complex. We have to be very careful we don't do more harm than good. No country in the Muslim world is more dangerous than Pakistan, with its large nuclear arsenal, failing state institutions and seething jihadist extremism. A couple of years ago Washington settled on a seemingly attractive political strategy. It backed Benazir Bhutto as the moderate, civilian politician most likely to win popular support and tried to help her negotiate a reconciliation with the military. The formula was indeed enticing. It offered the prospect of having civil society, an electoral mandate and the military in Pakistan all working together for economic development and to combat extremism. The problem is that Bhutto's identification with the US, as much as anything, got her killed. And with her death the political strategy fell to pieces. Something similar happened with Bashir Gemayel in Lebanon some three decades ago. In many of these Muslim countries it can be dangerous to be an enemy of America but absolutely fatal to be America's friend.

This suggests that, however distasteful and sub-optimal it is, a strategy of indirect support of friends is probably best. Thus in this light although the Obama administration looked clumsy during the Egyptian uprising, it is hard to see what else good it could have done. Close identification with any faction would have damned it. And given how prone the Middle East is to conspiracy theories, it is

important that the people of the Middle East come to take responsibility for their own political and economic futures.

This is not a counsel of abdication and abandonment. The US is still rich enough to provide aid that makes a difference. Carefully applied, this is a powerful tool. Similarly, the US can still play a big role in conferring, or denying, international legitimacy on a government. It can selectively provide military help. And as an absolute last resort, it can still threaten military intervention.

What a lot of people see as fecklessness in Obama's Middle East policy, I see as a not unreasonable caution, while maintaining essential commitments, in a situation where there is no clear path to success. This might be as good as it gets for the moment.